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SUBJ: CIVIL SOCIETY AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS MEET AT FORUM FOR THE  
FUTURE SOM IN ABU DHABI

11. (SBU) Summary: The Fifth Forum for the Future's Senior Officials' Meeting, on October 18 in Abu Dhabi, provided a venue for civil society and government representatives to present their views on a number of reform issues and discuss regional efforts to advance democratic development. Tension flared between the two sides on several occasions, in particular following accusations leveled at the Sudanese and Mauritanian governments and alleged interference by the Syrian government in civil society participation. Nevertheless, the meeting moved the two sides measurably closer to the adoption of a Partnership Document which would commit governments and civil society organizations to work together in a more constructive fashion toward democratic reform goals. End summary.

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Opening Statements --  
Giving CSOs and Reform their Due  
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12. (SBU) The Chair, Director of Diplomatic Training at the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Foreign Ministry Dr. Youssef al-Hassan, opened the Third Senior Officials Preparatory Meeting of the Forum for the Future after a half-hour delay he attributed to technical difficulties (which may have been partly due to a haphazard badging process). In his acknowledgments he referred to civil society representatives present as the "private sector" but quickly corrected the term, recognizing that the Forum's preparation had involved important input from civil society organizations (CSOs). He set the tone for the day's meeting by citing the need for partnership between governments and CSOs. Governments face many difficult challenges due to instability in the security and economic realms (in the first of many allusions during the Meeting to the global financial crisis); the UAE, he mentioned, is looking to the Forum to find solutions, and hopes that its outcome will provide the basis for increased cooperation and partnership.

13. (SBU) The Japanese Co-Chair (as G8 President), Takehiro Kagawa, Deputy Director-General for the Middle East at the Japanese Foreign Ministry, used his opening remarks to express Japan's commitment to the Forum process. Kagawa apologized for Foreign Minister Nakasone's need to return to Japan the same evening, making it impossible for him to participate in the following day's Ministerial. (Note: Nakasone returned to Tokyo to participate in Diet deliberations regarding Japan's refueling mission in the Indian Ocean in support of US and NATO operations in Afghanistan. End note.) While the FM would attend the Ministerial Dinner, Japan would be represented at the Ministerial Meeting by the Senior Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Seiko Hashimoto.

14. (SBU) After asking the media to depart the room, the UAE Chair called for the adoption of the agenda, in the absence of any objections. The Oman delegation head intervened to request a change in the translation of "reform" from the Arabic word "islah" to an Arabic word closer to "development." The UAE Chair noted that "islah" is a correct and standard translation that appears throughout the Forum documents, and declared the agenda adopted.

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Political Reform and Women's Empowerment --  
Civil Society Presentation Summaries  
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15. (SBU) The next agenda item was the presentation by civil society representatives of the findings of their preparatory working groups. Presenters of the "Political Reform" rubric were unanimous in their disappointment at the lack of progress since the Forum's 2005 inception. The UAE's Dr. Ebtisam al-Kitbi, a UAE University professor, noted that reform was hampered by inequality, lack of individual freedom, corruption, and suppression of free expression in the form of Internet and satellite television censorship. Al-Kitbi also condemned the role of militaries and other armed groups in squelching dissent and free expression, citing the recent coup in Mauritania and the exposure of journalists to violence in "combat zones." (Al-Kitbi's intervention prompted a later rejoinder from the Mauritanian delegate to the effect that the coup in his country was a "correction" integral to his country's process of democratization.) Egypt's Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim called attention to his former imprisonment and current self-imposed exile, and noted that the Forum's inception in 2005 provided a "spark of hope." That spark is gone now, he said, owing to a lack of commitment on the part of "the G-8 countries" (in an apparent reference to Co-Chair Japan) to continue the process, thereby ceding the field to authoritarian regimes. Dr. Abdul Husain Shaaban called for a change in the culture surrounding reform, calling reform "not a luxury but a universal need" and insisting that partnership with civil society is "not a gift but a duty" on the part of governments. Dr. Shaaban cited a list of changes in the legislative environment that would need to take place before such a partnership could be realized, including measures relating to the registration of CSOs, their

financing, their ability to network both locally and internationally, and adoption of international norms against the suppression of CSOs and detention of their members.

16. (U) The presenters of "Women's Empowerment" made a number of recommendations, including the establishment of a regional "Gender Institute." According to the first presenter, Nadia Ait-Zai of the University of Algiers, the Institute would research and encourage gender equality and social justice, facilitate exchanges in expertise, and strengthen the relationships among CSOs working in the field. Lebanon's Houda al-Khatib reported that the Women's Empowerment Seminar recommended the adoption of quota systems to insure the participation of women in at least 30% of political positions; laws to end discrimination against women; adoption of school curricula designed to end stereotyping; protection against violence; the right of women to participate in all areas of economic activity; and programs to promote women in leadership positions.

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Political Reform and Women's Empowerment --  
Government Reaction and Discussion  
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17. (U) Next came the government delegations' opportunity to respond to CSO representatives. The delegation of the next G-8 Chair, Italy, reaffirmed the GOI's commitment to facilitating constructive dialogue between governments and CSOs "with respect for sovereignty." Italy called attention to the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD) of which it is (with Turkey and Yemen) a sponsor, expressing hope that the DAD's Partnership Document will be adopted during the following day's Ministerial Meeting. The USG delegation head DRL A/S Kramer noted that while it is encouraging to see many CSOs enjoying a seat at the table at the Forum, it is important that CSOs obtain a similar "seat at the table" in their own societies. Kramer saluted the work of the Parallel Civil Society Forum that had just concluded in Dubai. The Pakistani and Lebanese delegates were eager to highlight their governments' commitment to gender equality, citing the number of women in leadership roles in Pakistan and recent legislative and political achievements in a Lebanon finally free "to live in peace in the region."

18. (SBU) The CSO presentations had many government delegations on the defensive, however. While welcoming CSO participation in the Forum, stating that governments and civil society are "not enemies,"

and notably refusing to react to Saad Eddin Ibrahim's accusation of wrongful imprisonment in Egypt, the Egyptian delegate described reform as "a complicated process, full of errors and mistakes." He expressed hope for CSOs' "mature participation" in the Forum and that the Forum would not be used solely for criticism. He handed the microphone to a female Egyptian delegation member, who endorsed the CSO suggestion to establish a Gender Institute. The Syrian delegate voiced his support for cooperation between governments and CSOs, but noted that the SARG goal is to "advance our own communities." He defended Damascus' record on women's empowerment, averring that Syrian women participate in all spheres of life. The Yemeni delegate stressed that his country is considered an "emerging democracy" and that many important reforms are underway, but that they need time and "external support."

¶9. (SBU) In a series of interventions, civil society representatives and the UAE delegation called for increased participation by Saudi women in upcoming Forum meetings and other settings. Bahraini activist Abdul Nebi al-Akri pointed out that all participating governments had accepted the notion of reform, but that a peaceful process of reform had proved elusive. Lest civil society representatives and governments be fated to merely "jump from one conference to another," there is need for a coordinating authority for civil society that will work on a continuing basis. The Bahraini delegate welcomed these comments and noted that some countries have moved faster down the path of reform than others, and that participants must be frank and "acknowledge their mistakes." The delegate also took a swipe at "superpower, super-rich countries [that] have not played their part" (again, a probable reference to Japan). He thanked the USG and UK for establishing and providing funding for a Center for Entrepreneurship in Bahrain, but acknowledged that the project had fallen through due to a lack of commitment from other G-8 countries.

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Sustainable Development  
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¶10. (U) First among civil society presenters on the Sustainable Development topic was Tunisian Mohsen Marzouk of the Arab Democracy Foundation, based in Qatar. Marzouk said CSO reps had examined the issue of school curricula and recommended the inclusion of material relating to human rights, as well as a Summit on Education to take place in the second half of the current academic year. Presenter

Sheikha al-Shamsi seconded these curriculum proposals and suggested also that governments should introduce more programs to prepare young people for the job market. She proposed a fund for technology and scientific development and an entrepreneurship center to be located in the UAE, and called on Co-Chairs UAE and Japan to support one or both initiatives. A representative of Masdar energy outlined his company's plans to develop renewable energy projects in the UAE.

¶11. (U) Fatima al-Abdali, a Kuwaiti activist, stressed the role of the private sector in Sustainable Development, and reported that Parallel Forum participants found that private sector organizations suffer the same kinds of challenges as CSOs. Those institutions nevertheless have a vital role in formulating policy and legislation. The private sector should give something back to the community, but governments must also support entrepreneurship and training, enact United Nations-endorsed anti-corruption measures, and cooperate with think tanks and the private sector on research and development. Abdul Wahab al-Kibsi, of the Center for International Private Enterprise in the United States, expressed his hope that the financial crisis would not sideline reform efforts, and noted that it is not economic liberalization that is to blame for the crisis, but rather bad corporate governance and a lack of disclosure, transparency, and accountability.

¶12. (U) The Egyptian and Pakistani delegates highlighted their countries' commitment to vocational training. The UK representative alerted participants to the danger that governments may conclude from the financial crisis that implementation of reforms in areas like education and renewable energy should be delayed. The fact that so many governments and civil society representatives are gathered together in one place sends a powerful message, however. The French delegate seconded these sentiments and stressed the

importance of vocational training.

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Progress and Review -- Towards a Partnership  
Document and the Future of the Forum  
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¶13. (U) Following a break, discussion turned to some of the concrete outcomes that the Forum would seek in this session. Organizers of the Foundation for the Future presented a progress report on the establishment of the Foundation's office in Amman and the funding of several programs, and welcomed the participation of civil society. Iraqi Kurd activist and former Human Rights Minister Bakhtiar al-Amin noted the region's cultural and ethnic diversity and called for the establishment of a regional "Diversity Center" to study, promote and protect that diversity.

¶14. (U) Two presenters from the Democracy Assistance Dialogue were given the floor. Ezzadin al-Asbahi of the Human Rights Information and Training Center (HRITC) of Yemen called for revision and evaluation of the Forum, including the setting of goals that could be evaluated after one year. He called on the Forum to produce a "single big project," with possible reference to the Partnership Document. The Partnership Document project was expounded by Niccolo Figa-Tallamanca of Italian NGO and DAD partner No Peace Without Justice as a commitment by governments and CSOs to work together. His comments gained the endorsement of the Italian, Bahraini, Moroccan, Turkish and USG delegations, all of which expressed their hope that a Document would be concluded and adopted at the present Forum. The USG delegate stressed the continuing USG commitment to the Forum and assessed that the clear willingness around the table to examine work with the Document draft shows that the meeting is on the road to adoption of the Partnership Document.

¶15. (SBU) Significantly, the Egyptian delegate also expressed support for the adoption of the Partnership Document, although he stressed that it must "enjoy the support of all parties and not just a couple of delegations" and must remain in conformity with "our national laws." (Note: Those laws restrict, among other things, outside funding for Egyptian CSOs. End note.) The UAE delegate seconded the Egyptian position with slightly warmer support for the Document. Following the ejection by the UAE Chair of four Syrians who had allegedly seated themselves in the civil society area under false pretenses, the Syrian delegate did not return from the break. Neither he nor the Tunisian delegate was present during the second half of the Senior Officials Meeting.

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Last Fireworks  
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¶16. (SBU) A few general interventions of note were launched before the end of the meeting. Women's Empowerment rapporteur Amal al-Basha, a Yemeni activist, decried the fact that several of the original Forum agenda items had disappeared in successive Forum

sessions, as well as the lack of progress in legislative reform since the start of the Forum process. She pointed out that Arab governments are quick to rally around certain issues (such as condemning the effort to prosecute Sudanese President Bashir and indict the Sudanese legal system for its failure to act in response to abuses in Darfur) whereas they had made no progress fulfilling their reform commitments. Her example drew a passionate defense

from the Sudanese delegate, averring that the Sudanese legal system is a model for the region, that international observers have been invited to witness its functioning in the Darfur cases, that a special prosecutor has been appointed, and that accusations against the President ignore "facts on the ground."

¶17. (SBU) The Palestinian delegate called for a "new relationship between developed countries and the developing world." He advocated the discussion of the topics of terrorism and extremism in the Forum, and for the adoption by the Forum of a call on Israel to remove settlements. A Syrian activist based in Lebanon, Nour Rostom, shared her observations as a newcomer to the Forum that cooperation among delegations and civil society representatives has been exemplary during the Forum but poor thereafter, resulting in a

lack of progress for four years. There is a demonstrable need to work on implementation and enforcement rather than just aspiring to reform; reform will follow such practical steps. Finally, there are many issues that the Forum has had to elide due to a lack of time, including the effects of violent conflict. Rostom suggested extending the Forum schedule to several days.

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Wrap-up  
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¶18. (U) The Japanese Co-Chair concluded that the presence of so many participants from governments and civil society sitting together at the Forum, in and of itself, carries "deep meaning." He added that while the discussions are helpful, the Forum is not about "dialogue for dialogue." Rather, there is an action-oriented agenda for all participants. The financial crisis will affect societies in the region, and government and CSOs must cooperate to get through it. Finally, he expressed his satisfaction that the meeting had brought the Partnership Document so close to conclusion. The UAE Chair expressed his sense that the hard work of the Senior Officials Meeting would pave the way for success in the Ministerial, and brought the meeting to a close.

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